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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 MADRID 000272

SIPDIS

PASS TO EUR/WE'S ELAINE SAMSON AND STACIE ZERDECKI,
S/CT'S MARC NORMAN AND JASON BLAZAKIS,
NSC'S ELIZABETH FARR,
NCTC'S PAUL SAUPE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2024

TAGS: [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SP](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: SPAIN: EXPERTS SEE WEAKENING OF BASQUE TERRORIST
GROUP ETA

REF: A. MADRID 139

[1](#)B. 08 MADRID 1231

[1](#)C. 08 MADRID 1055

[1](#)D. 08 MADRID 1306

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Classified By: ADCM William H. Duncan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Embassy Madrid recently pulsed the opinions on Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) watchers for their thoughts on the relative strength or weakness of the group. The consensus is that ETA is dramatically weakened but retains the ability to kill and do significant damage. One Embassy contact provided to POLOFF and the Embassy's Information Officer an alleged ETA internal strategy document, which apparently came into his possession from his contacts in the Spanish security services. Post cannot independently verify the authenticity of the file, which our contact described as the ETA equivalent of the documents retrieved from senior FARC official Raul Reyes' PC in 2008. The document, which appears to have been finalized in December 2008, is highly critical of the group's actions in recent years and maps out a strategy for the way forward, in which it makes clear that the group intends to fight to the end and is not seeking "an honorable exit." Post will pouch a copy of the document to interested parties. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

//The Judicial Perspective//

[1](#)2. (C) On February 24, POLOFF and LEGAT spoke at length with Magistrate Javier Gomez Bermudez, the President of the National Court's Criminal Chamber, who has overseen several high-profile ETA trials, including those for the 1995 assassination of the center-right Popular Party's regional leader in the Basque Country, Gregorio Ordenez, and for the 1997 assassination of kidnapped Basque town councilman Miguel Angel Blanco. POLOFF and LEGAT asked for the magistrate's thoughts on the relative strength or weakness of ETA and how he envisioned ETA's armed conflict with the GOS would end. He replied that, for all intents and purposes, ETA already is over. He couched his comments by adding that there will always be some thug who will be willing to commit violence and invoke some vaguely political rationale, but by and large ETA has been defeated. He further remarked that the number of deaths ETA causes on an annual basis is nowhere near the

early 1980s, when the rate was one every three days. He agreed with the notion that ETA receives a disproportionate amount of press and political discussion compared to its current threat capability. The amount of violence that exists today - three or four deaths per year - will never go away, he claimed.

//ETA's Capabilities, Weaknesses Discussed//

13. (C) The Ministry of Interior, however, treats the threat posted by ETA as very real. In a January 15 meeting with an adviser to the Deputy Minister, POLOFF offered the Embassy's congratulations for the Ministry's back-to-back arrests of two of the terrorist groups' military leaders in late 2008 (See REFTEL A). The adviser described the arrests as important, but added, "we're not done yet," meaning ETA is still active. This senior Guardia Civil officer indicated that he talks with his French counter-terrorism counterparts about ETA "every day." He also remarked the latest generation of ETA leaders has less political acumen, a notion with which Oscar Beltran Otalora, political editor of the Bilbao-based newspaper, El Correo, and an expert on ETA, agrees. Most of the ETA operatives today are very violent and radicalized, but inexperienced and without any education, Beltran claimed. In a February 6 phone call with POLOFF, Beltran likened ETA's current weakness to the last days of World War II, when Hitler's army comprised "child soldiers and old men." An entire generation of Etxarras is in Spanish and French jails, he noted. COMMENT: As reported in REFTEL A, there were a record number of ETA members in jail as of the end of 2008. END COMMENT.

14. (C) Jesus Maria Zuloaga, the Deputy Director of conservative-leaning, La Razon newspaper whose bio and

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credentials are provided in REFTEL B, discussed ETA's status with POLOFF and Embassy Madrid's Information Officer on March

12. Zuloaga said he still considers ETA to be "very dangerous." Following the February 9 car bomb attack in Madrid (See REFTEL A) and keeping in mind the still-unexplained case of a Madrid gardener who was briefly kidnapped in September 2008 in an apparent case of mistaken identity (See REFTEL C), Zuloaga was adamant that ETA has reconstituted a cell of some kind in the Spanish capital. He acknowledged that the official GOS stance is that this is not the case, but Zuloaga claims this is a "politically convenient" position, because if the Ministry of Interior did publicly state that there was probably an ETA cell in Madrid, then there would be immense pressure on the Ministry to neutralize it. Zuloaga said he has spoken with security services personnel who interviewed the gardener, whose reputation is that of a stable person who does not abuse drugs or alcohol, but who now refuses to have his picture taken by the press and has had to quit his job because he is terrified and traumatized. Zuloaga suggested that ETA may have been attempting something similar to its kidnapping of Miguel Angel Blanco, who was executed after ETA's demands for a ransom were not met.

15. (C) Zuloaga also opined on the recent turnover in ETA's leadership. He commented that he doubts that Jurdan Martitegi is actually the new military chief, as the press has reported (See REFTEL A), and suggests that Martitegi is probably just one of the most high-profile militants still at large whose name the GOS security forces know. Zuloaga also speculated on the December 9 arrest of Aitzol Iriondo, the short-lived successor to ETA's long-time military chief, Txeroki. Zuloaga said that the Spanish security forces only had a very small handful of officers monitoring the location where Iriondo was arrested. They could not believe that he arrived at a location whose security had been compromised following Txeroki's November 17 arrest, which Zuloaga cites as evidence that Iriondo was either really dumb, was sacrificed by rivals within ETA who set him up, or that there is a mole in ETA who tipped off the security services about

his attendance at the meeting.

//Alleged ETA File Conducts "Ferocious" Self Criticism, Offers Strategy For Future//

¶6. (S) Zuloaga (Please Protect) also provided Embassy officials a 69-page document which he claimed was an internal strategy document recently prepared by ETA, although Post cannot independently verify its authenticity. Zuloaga described the file as the ETA equivalent of the documents retrieved from senior FARC official Raul Reyes' PC in 2008. The document - which is written in Castilian Spanish rather than Basque/Euskera - is part critical reflection on recent ETA missteps, part rant against capitalism, globalization and perceived oppression by the Spanish and French states, and part political platform for the way forward in building the type of society ETA would like to see in Euskal Herria, which would be comprised of the Basque and Navarra regions in Spain and the three historic Basque provinces in France: Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea, and Zuberoa. Zuloaga claims the file likely was drafted over the course of the 18-month period from the end of ETA's "permanent unilateral ceasefire" in June 2007 until December 2008. Zuloaga suggested the document was the result of a "virtual meeting" of ETA's Executive Committee, its highest ruling body, conducted by passing the file to one another via thumb drives. He described its anonymous primary author as an intellectual who is very experienced within ETA, a mature individual perhaps in his 40s or 50s, and someone who thinks he knows fairly well the policies of Spain's Socialist President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and the Socialist party's Basque wing.

¶7. (S) For longtime ETA watcher Zuloaga, the document is notable for conveying a much more pragmatic rather than fanatical tone, while at the same time leaving no doubt that the group intends to fight to the end and is not seeking "an honorable exit." In Zuloaga's words, the document undertakes a "ferocious" self-criticism of ETA's recent past and in particular calls for a "profound reflection" on the

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limitations of the group's recent military operations. In particular, the author adamantly asserts that ETA should have undertaken a greater number of attacks in the run-up to its March 2006 declaration of a "permanent unilateral ceasefire," which the author claims would have then enabled the group to negotiate with the GOS from a position of strength. The document also condemns the group for its lack of preparation to develop a clear negotiating position during the ceasefire and for not doing more to build public support for its stance before, during, and after ceasefire.

¶8. (S) The document acknowledges that ETA currently is weakened by Spanish and French security services, which are putting considerable pressure on the group and limiting recruiting efforts. The author therefore suggests changing the group's modus operandi to make itself less predictable. The document suggests the group ought to conduct attacks where and when security services least expect them and also urges the group to constantly change its security measures, in an effort to better protect its leadership. (COMMENT: Zuloaga pointed to the document as the explanation as to why ETA did not conduct more high-profile or more destructive attacks in the run-up to the March 1 election in the Basque Region: it was too predictable. END COMMENT.) The author of the document recommends that the group at present concentrate on raising money, while conducting "selective, discriminating, and prudent" attacks in which it seeks to cause "the greatest possible damage to the enemy's interests" while making every effort to avoid collateral victims, in an effort not to lose whatever public support the group has. The document - which identifies 12 different categories of approved targets - urges that the group lay low and bide its time until a more politically convenient time to step up its attacks. The document states, "It is an accepted reality that the keys to the resolution of the conflict will be

political and will be done through a negotiation process." However, it concludes by stating that "ceasefires and truces - whether partial or general - will only be established, managed and maintained with the objective of reaching inflection points and political jumping-off points within the process of liberation."

//Comment//

9.(C) Anything is possible, but we think a return to the negotiating table by Zapatero is unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future. The lure of negotiating with ETA for a Spanish President is to be the one who delivers a definitive end to a 40-year old problem that has baffled all previous governments. The risk, as Zapatero found to his cost, is that ETA is brutal, untrustworthy, and has an unrealistic agenda. Many Spaniards say it has become little more than an extortion racket. Zapatero was much-criticized by his political opponents during the 2008 general election for his policy of negotiating with ETA, particularly when he was forced to admit negotiations had continued after the 2006 Barajas bombing and after he had told the public that negotiations had ceased. He would be unwise to risk further political damage, particularly as he carries the weight of the financial crisis on his shoulders and faces a number of regional elections between now and the next general election in 2012.

CHACON